

The Whole Language Approach to Education

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Jessica A. Soughan

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dennis R. Hoilman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Dr. Dennis Hoilman, Advisor

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

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Purpose of Thesis

This thesis is an explanation of the Whole Language teaching strategy. It uncludes descriptions of the method as applied to reading, writing, and spelling, several plans for implementing the strategy in a classroom, and samples of students' work using this particular teaching method.

Whole Language is a new teaching strategy that is more than classroom methodology. It is a philosophy, a belief, and a way of life for those teachers and parents who ascribe to it.

Courtney Cazden (1991) defines the Whole Language strategy as an environment where "children learn what they live . . . in a context of a meaningful, functional use" (p. 7). Whole Language allows children to shape the curriculum according to their own interests and experiences. It allows the students to read and write about what they know. No longer are they limited to a basal series with stories and activities irrelevant to their lives and selected by others.

Traditional classrooms focus on a set curriculum, usually defined by the basal series adopted by the school board. The teacher has a list of materials mandated by the state and community, that must be covered by the end of the year. This method is easy to use. The teacher merely finds the appropriate chapter in the basal, uses the fabricated materials, and grades according to performance on the provided standardized test. In this environment the teachers don't have to plan interesting supplemental activities because many worksheets are provided. The students

simply fill in the blank on the papers and aren't thinking at a high level. They are have no reason to be interested in these work-sheets that do not reflect their own lifestyles or opinions.

Both Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky have influenced the development of Whole Language by saying that problem solving and acquisition of language are social and active processes. One learns by using and doing (Robb, 1994, p. 11). Whole Language provides an opportunity for children to explore the reading and writing process. The key word is opportunity. Reading and writing aren't limited to thirty minutes a day. Students read and write in subjects across the curriculum, all day, every day (Weaver, 1993, p. 15). This heavily contrasts the basal method of teaching where "teachable moments" with students go by because they aren't on the worksheet, and student questions are put off because children's curiosities are voiced at the wrong time. With Whole Language, there is no wrong time. The focus of every second of teaching is the students, not the agenda.

The focus of their reading and writing is also different from the focus directed by the basal series. In a Whole Language program, the students as a class will have a voice in the content to be taught through voting for class materials or through individual selection. By sharing their personal interests, they contribute a

part to their education. Using the students' interests is also very positive for the students. By using students' interests, a teacher not only motivates the students to read and write, "...but builds the child's self-esteem when she realizes that her ideas, hobbies, and pursuits are taken seriously" (Stanek, 1993, p. 41). As the children decide the path of their journey, they claim ownership of their education.

Linda Robb uses children's interests as a source for her teaching. She decided to do this after simply talking to children about why some projects were more important to them than others. She found that some students would devote hours of high quality work to a given project, yet hardly bother with others. The students answered her questions and told her that the only reason for the difference in work and the motivation was the topic. "A burning curiosity about a particular subject motivated the the children to read and research, to write and construct elaborate projects that satisfied their quest for answers" (Robb, p. 9).

The teacher should base the topics of study on the interests of the students. Following that theme, reading and writing should also be based on students' experiences. Stanek provides a good justification for this idea: "Remember the thrill the first time you read a story and thought: that is exactly how I felt when

my grandmother died, the cat ran away, my boyfriend quit me, I lost the game, the other kids laughed, my best friend didn't stand up for me, or my parents got a divorce? You might have thought, I could write a story just like that...." (p. 25). This is exactly the relationship between child and text needed to inspire kids to read and write. They need materials that mean something to them.

Stanek also mentions this by relating one of his own experiences in college: "Until you show me the me in Hamlet, don't expect me to appreciate him just because you know a lot about him" (p. 25).

By writing about their personal experiences, students are, again, making another investment in their own education. Such personal involvement makes learning authentic and meaningful (Manning, 1989, p. 96).

The theme in a Whole Language program, therefore, is chosen in a collaborative effort with the children based on their interests and experiences. The content for the lessons, however, such as grammar skills and sentence structure, can come from the curriculum mandated by the state or community. By using trade books and a literature-based classroom, the teacher can pull information from almost any book or printed material to teach a particular lesson.

Almost all teachers agree that one of the first ways children

learn to read is by recognizing the signs and symbols around them. Any four-year-old can recognize a McDonald's sign while riding in the car, and building on this natural recognition is the next logical step. This is most easily accomplished by immersing the child in print (Cambourne, 1988, p. 74). Reading signs, advertisements, menus, newspapers, labels, or anything that has print is one of the most important factors of language acquisition according to Robb.

Another way that parents and teachers can encourage children to develop language is simply to talk to them as a short adult. Robb says that "children who have listened to thousands of stories and engaged in meaningful conversations with adults at home are more successful learners than children who are language- and story-deprived" (p. 21).

Modeling is the formal term for the Whole Language approach to teaching content matter. This process involves a teacher showing a student how to perform a task. Modeling can be done by reading aloud to show proper fluency or pronunciation, or writing sentences on the board to show proper handwriting and spelling. By modeling, an adult role model is provided for the children to imitate in their reading and writing.

The students can also model for one another. This dem-

onstration of knowledge builds self-esteem for the upper level child, and sometimes provides a faster solution for the needful child rather than waiting for the teacher to answer a question.

One of the best ways to encourage a child to read is to model good reading. Too many adults stop reading to children when the children are able to read for themselves (Robb, p. 22). Reading aloud can be beneficial to students even at the high school level. Robb also lists modeling and sharing of favorite books to be a strong motivator for reluctant readers, and believes it to be more effective than "a multitude of bribes and threats" (p. 10).

Another effective strategy used to model is "big books." Don Holdaway was the man who created the oversized books that are so popular with Whole Language teachers today (1980, p. 11). Using these books, a teacher gathers the children around her and the entire class reads from one book.

Silent Sustained Reading, also known as SSR, is a vital component of a reading program as well. SSR is a set time of day when the children are allowed to read books of their own choice for a prearranged period of time. The children should be allowed to reread their favorite books as well as any new books that interest them. By rereading books, children increase their com-

prehension, vocabulary, and recall of detail (Newman, 1982, p. 171).

Modeling is also helpful in the writing aspect of a Whole Language program. According to Gordon Wells' research in 1986 "the most accomplished writers by eight or nine had parents who frequently wrote lists, notes, and memos" (p. 21). Again, it is possible to see the advantage of modeling at the proper developmental stages.

The two disciplines, reading and writing, need not be separated. Often the writing can be based on the reading done for the day, or the reading can be done as research for a project. David Hornsby explains how the two are related by suggesting that the writer rereads his writing over and over in his search for clarity and meaning (1992, p. 8).

There are many different ways to focus on writing in the classroom according to a Whole Language approach, but the main focus, again, is to allow students to be themselves. They need to choose their topics and write in their own voice (Robb, p. 10). This is not suggesting that students do not need to write formally. On the contrary, formal writing is a very effective way to spread writing across the curriculum. Science and Social Studies both lend themselves easily to formal writing. A balance is need-

ed, however, and the children need to be able to express their ideas and feelings on paper, as well as participate in formal writing. Journals are a way for students to write informally in a classroom setting. Susan Tchudi says this in regard to journals: "People who keep journals live life twice. Having written something down gives you the opportunity to go back to it over and over, to remember and relive the experience" (1984, p. 20).

Journals, as a personal form of writing, also give writers an opportunity to experiment with different writing styles. Cambridge suggests that learners "need time to practice and use their knowledge in realistic and natural ways" (p. 34). Journals are a private place with a selected audience for entertaining the dreams, hopes, and ideas that wander through the mind. The paper is a non-threatening listener that respects all projects.

Spelling is the last discipline to be covered and it, too, should be incorporated with reading and writing. Spelling is easily covered with story vocabulary and modeling. It is important, though, to recognize the purpose of a paper before deciding to evaluate the spelling. In a formal paper that has undergone several phases of editing and revising, evaluation of spelling is justified. Equally though, one should not evaluate spelling on rough drafts or private writing, like journals. The first purpose of

writing is to record the thoughts of the writer, however they may be expressed. By criticizing the spelling at this point in the writing process the teacher will discourage children from expressing their thoughts freely.

J. Richard Gentry believes that inventive spelling is a natural base for young children (1987, p. 39). Students using this method create their own spellings based on the spelling words they do know. They might spell "house" as "hows" simply because they recognize the sounds that belong in the word although they don't have the knowledge to spell it correctly. Gentry also says that this is a natural phase for all children, and it is important to encourage them to express their writing at this crucial developmental point. "Kids who invent spellings think about words and in doing so generate new knowledge" (p. 40).

Spelling should be modeled consistently. If a single word is misspelled several times throughout a journal entry, perhaps a teacher might find a way to write a comment to the student in the margin, or introduce the word to the whole class, modeling the proper spelling in a non-threatening way. This form of modeling allows the teacher to correct the error without discouraging the child. This method also allows the students to self-correct their own errors in future writing without creating a stigma of failure for

the child.

Because the philosophy of Whole Language pulls teachers away from standardized tests and easy evaluation, the last major hurdle of the program is assessment of the students.

First of all, the evaluation is a continuous process. It is not conveniently done every nine weeks. Evaluation happens on a daily basis as the teacher observes the children in their learning. Robb suggests "watch and listen to kids, talk to kids about their process, read their work, and take copious notes for reflection" (p. 10).

Robb's idea supports the second point of Whole Language Assessment, which is evaluation of the process, not the product. It is important to note all the steps each piece of writing went through and what each child learned as the paper developed. The end product is not the finished paper, but the child who now will read and write.

Conferences are an effective method of checking student's progress. This allows a set time for a teacher to meet with a child and discuss the books and topics that the child is covering. Conferences are also an appropriate time for the teacher to share his or her expectations with students (Cambourne, p. 12).

Writing performance can be beneficial to all the students in

a class, too. Students in groups of two or three can meet together and discuss the work accomplished by the individual members of that group. Proof-reading, editing, and revising can also be done at this time. Cambourne acknowledges that mistakes are a necessary part of the learning process (p. 24). By recognizing these mistakes, students can learn from them.

Whole Language involves a change in philosophy for many of the teachers who are in the classroom at this time. Using a basal series provides a great deal of security in planning. The answers are provided and the materials are already prepared. Whole Language requires a great deal of flexibility and creativity in planning. However, the benefits of a Whole Language program are apparent: children who love to read and write. This program involves a change in methods, but the change in the students is well worth the effort. Whole language is a vehicle that will take children on an imaginative vacation for the rest of their lives.

Lesson Plans for a Whole Language Program

The format for these plans was recommended by Dr. Barbara Negley, EdEI 465 at Ball State University. They are a quick look at the components needed for a whole language program. Almost every example shows reading and writing working together.

The author has not listed all of the grammar skills and language topics that must be pulled out of the texts of the books for whole language instruction. The material varies so much from day to day that it is not practical to list those topics in this format.

The lesson plans listed here are for a second grade level. These plans are easily adapted up or down for different grade levels. The plans themselves naturally suit a wide range of skills and ability levels.

Help! I'm a Prisoner...

Aims for this lesson:

- Modeling by reading aloud.
- Discussion of plot.
- Repetition of key details through writing.

Materials:

paper, markers, binding materials, and a copy of Help, I'm a Prisoner in the Library! by Eth Clifford.

Activity:

Read the book aloud to the students over the course of several days. Discuss the personal traits of Mary Rose and Jo Beth. Have your students name which character's personality they identify with: practical Mary Rose or imaginative and impulsive Jo Beth. Discuss the key points of the plot: the details that made it suspenseful, the sequence of events, and the setting.

Based on the discussions, allow the children to dictate a class story following the same theme. Include suspense and the obvious character traits from the novel, establishing parallelism with the novel.

Read the story aloud with the children several times during the writing to double check for details. Copy the story from the chalkboard to paper and have the children illustrate the pages. Bind the book together and leave it in your classroom library.

Culminating Activity:

Read the book to any real people that were included in your story. Consider sending a copy to the author, Eth Clifford, in care of Houghton Mifflin Company.

See Appendix A for a sample of student work.

Nate the Great

Aims for this lesson:

- Read authentic literature.
- Discuss materials read.
- Learn through imitation.

Materials:

paper, markers, binding, and various Nate the Great books by Marjorie Sharmat.

Activity:

Divide the different books among the children. Try to have at least five different titles in the classroom. After the children have read the books, have them list the characteristics common to all the books. An example is the fact that Nate always writes a note for his mother, and every story includes his dog Sludge.

Have the children dictate a Nate the Great story of their own. Have them include the story "standards" set by Sharmat. Copy the book from the chalk board to paper. Have the children illustrate the pages.

Culminating Activity:

Have the children celebrate with a publishing party. Include your school's librarian and serve Nate's favorite snack: pancakes and jam. Send a copy to the author, Ms. Sharmat, care of Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, Inc.

See Appendix B for a sample of student work.

When I Was Young in...

Aims for this lesson:

- Allows personal expression.
- Use of authentic literature.
- Informal or formal evaluation.

Materials:

pencils, paper, and a copy of When I Was Young in the Mountains by Cynthia Rylant.

Activity:

Read the book aloud to the children. Discuss where the teacher has grown up and what some of his or her favorite memories are. This is a time to share personal information with the children and allow them to see the teacher as a human being with a life away from school. The children will relate to that side of the teacher.

Have the children tell and write about "When I was young in..." Using this prompt is a good way to focus their thinking. Ask them to include details about places, people, favorite toys, and memories.

Culminating Activity:

Have the children illustrate this writing. Have students write a cover letter explaining the project and mail a copy of the letter and the project to a special friend mentioned in the story.

See Appendix C for a sample of student work.

Pyramid Poems

Aims for this lesson:

- Teach handwriting.
- Allow different forms of expression.
- Exposure to poetry.
- Practice with abstract thinking.

Materials:

paper, pencils, and computer access.

Activity:

Model the proper formation of the new letters. In the rough draft have the students focus on writing poetry centered around those letters. Show the children a sample poem. Focus on the number of words on each line. Count them together.

Model the correct format of the poem by writing one as a class on the overhead or chalkboard. Have the children select each phrase and count the words as a class. Encourage them to choose different and unusual topics that might interest them.

Culminating Activity:

Have the children type their poems into the computer. (This is a good project for younger students because the typing is limited. Set the computer type on centered instead of left margin or justified margins.) Hang the finished projects in the hallway.

See Appendix D for samples of student work.

Explaining the Mysteries

Aims for this lesson:

- Foster creativity in writing and thinking.
- Allows self-expression.
- Opportunity for informal or formal writing.

Materials:

pencils, paper, and a copy of The Mysteries of Harris Burdick by Chris Van Allsburg.

Activity:

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick is a book of story starters. It has illustrations with one line captions. They are very unusual and perfect for the student who says "I don't know what to write about!" Allow the children to sit on the floor near you and show them the pictures and read the captions. Have them keep all their ideas to themselves. Choose one picture for the entire class to write about. Have them write a story, working on total silence, to accompany the illustration.

Culminating Activity:

Have the students share their stories in groups of four or five. Have them select the best story from their groups to share with the class.

Pioneer Logs

Aims for this lesson:

Opportunity for creative/informal writing.
Expression of knowledge acquired on topic.

Materials:

tea bags, a bucket, water, paper, and pencils.

Activity:

Begin by teaching the social studies unit on pioneers. After the children are several days into it, have them adopt a personality from that period of history. They can write a journal based on the daily life of a pioneer. They should write using key words and details covered by class discussion.

Allow the children to include their own plots and character development.

Culminating Activity:

Drop the written letters into tea water for twenty-four hours and allow them to dry. The paper will turn brown and appear aged. Have the children share their pioneer adventures in small groups.

The Quilt Stories

Aims for this lesson:

- Opportunity for informal writing.
- Allows for personal sharing and expression.
- Responding to authentic literature.

Materials:

paper, pencils, a copy of The Rag Coat by Lauren Mills, scraps of fabric, and glue.

Activity:

Read the story The Rag Coat by Lauren Mills to the children. The story is about a girl whose coat is made from the scraps of the village children's clothes. As they see Minna in their scraps, they are reminded of how the fabric was special to them. Ask the students to remember fabric that was special to them, perhaps from a baby blanket or a favorite outfit.

As the children remember, have them write their memories about what they did when they wore that shirt or how they felt when they held that blanket.

Culminating Activity:

Have the children trim their paper with bits of fabric that remind them of their special items.

Christmas with Pippi

Aims for the lesson:

- Expose children to authentic literature.
- Allow written response to literature.
- Encourage creative and divergent thinking and writing.

Materials:

paper, pencils, wallpaper samples and a copy of Pippi Longstocking by Astrid Lindgren.

Activity:

Read the students Pippi Longstocking. Have them imagine inviting Pippi to their house for Christmas. The students should include what they would give Pippi as a gift and what they would receive from Pippi. They should also include any of mischief that Pippi usually gets into.

Culminating Activity:

Give the students the option of copying their writing onto the wallpaper, simply because Pippi would write on wallpaper. Her justification would be that it is paper, and placed very conveniently for writing.

Predicting What's Next

Aims of this lesson:

Recall of detail.
Ordering or sequence of events.
Predicting logically.

Materials:

pencils, paper, and a copy of Two Bad Ants by Chris Van Allsburg.

Activity:

This story is about two small ants and the adventures they have on a journey to gather crystals for their queen. Read to the bottom of page 29 and stop. The ants decide to stay in this new environment and not return to their hill. They have many adventures in the kitchen. By the end of breakfast the ants are exhausted. Have the children write at this point and finish the story, deciding what the ants are going to do, Will they go back alone, or live to make it through lunch?

Culminating Activity:

Allow the children to share their stories if they would like to, and then finish reading the end of the book. Have the children vote to find the best ending. Which was most exciting or most likely to happen.

The Sequel

Aims for the lesson:

- Discussion of detail.
- Exposure to authentic literature.
- Opportunity to respond in writing.

Materials:

paper, pencils, and a copy of A Lion to Guard Us by Clyde Robert Bulla.

Activity:

Read the entire story to the children, or have them read it. Discuss the personalities of the characters: Amanda, Meg, and Jemmy. Have the children think of the character with whom they most identify. Give them paper and allow them to continue the story from the point of view of that character. Their story can take place any time after the children arrive in Jamestown. They can write about the children growing up in the New World, or perhaps a new wife for their father. Maybe they might even return to London. Allow the children to make the decisions.

Culminating Activity:

Allow the children to share their stories with one another. Add the stories to the classroom library so that the children can choose one to take home with them and read to their family or friends.

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Appendix A

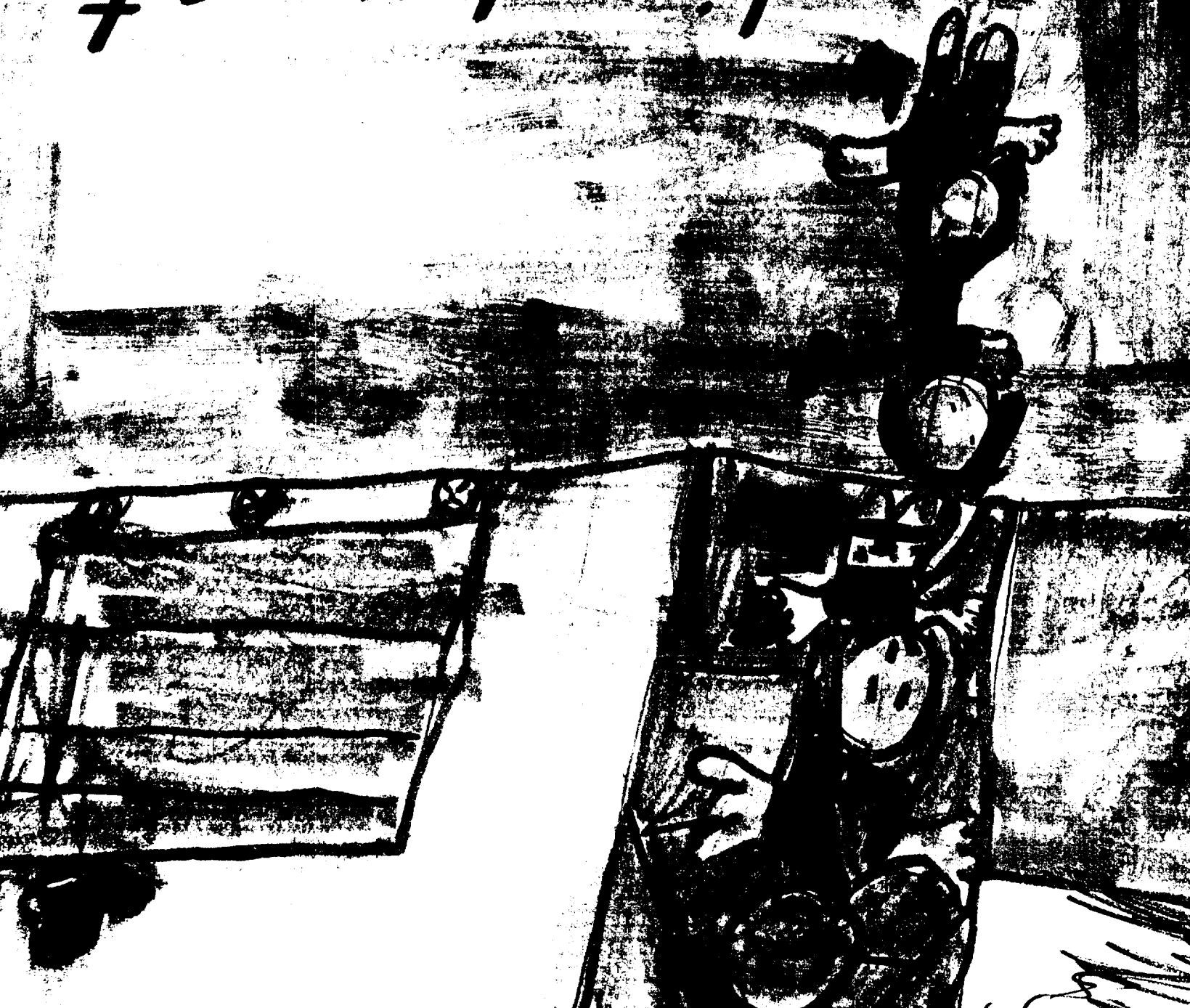
Sample of a big book based on Help! I'm a Prisoner in the Library! by Eth Clifford. Done by second grade students.

elp! We're
prisoners



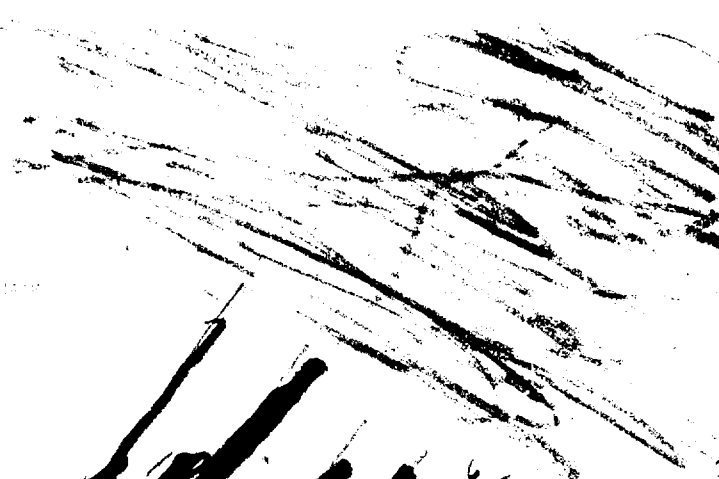


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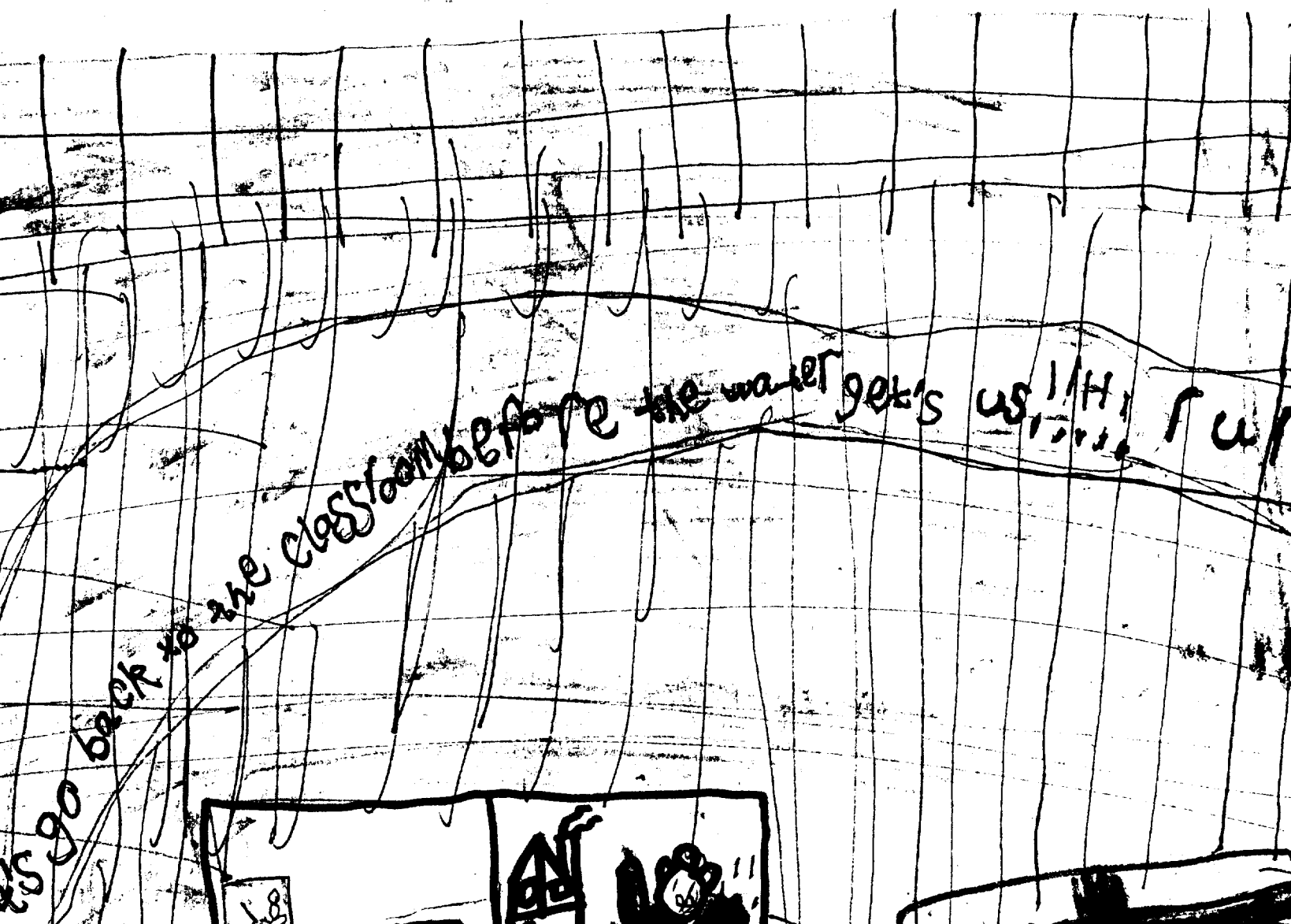
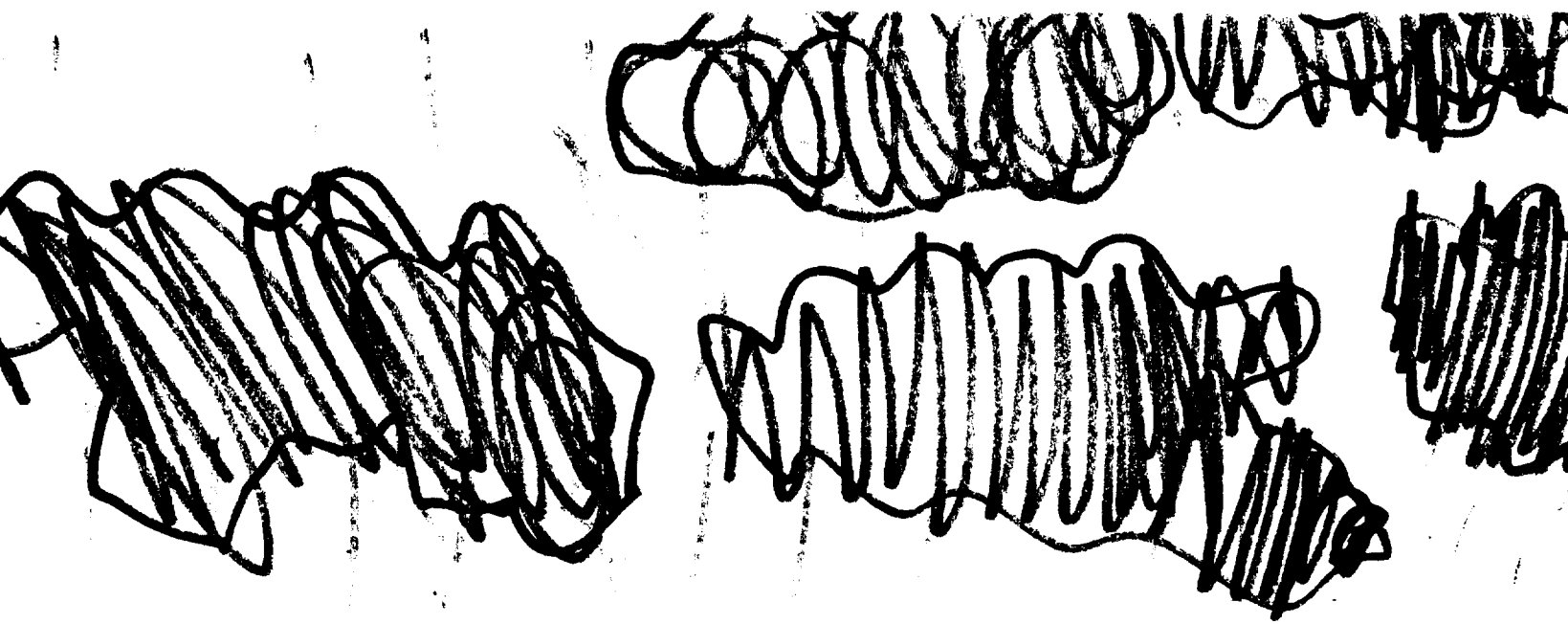


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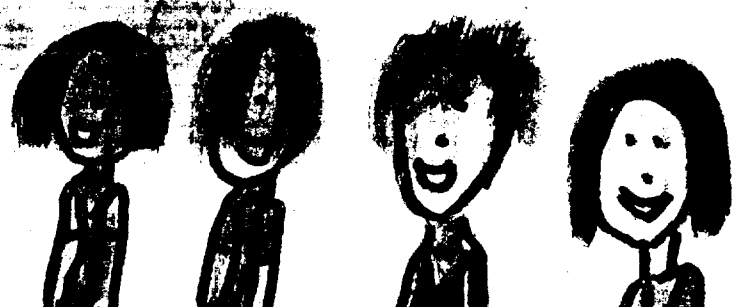
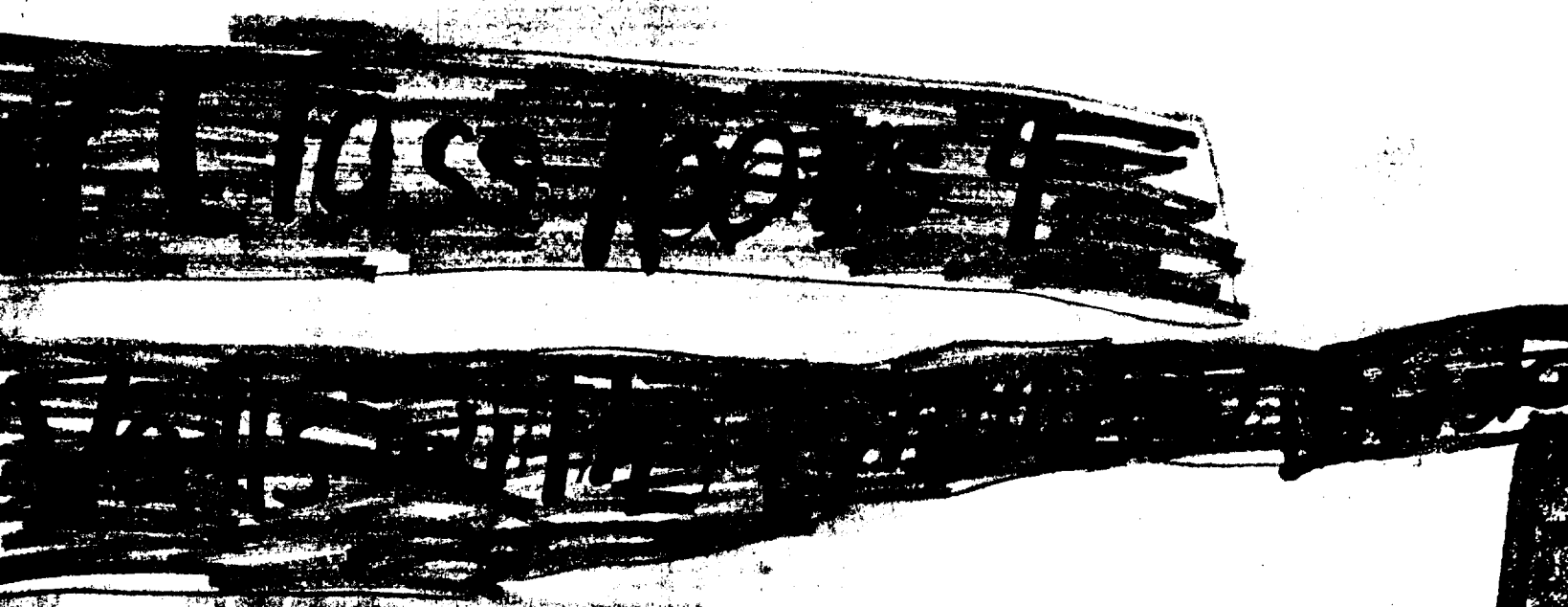
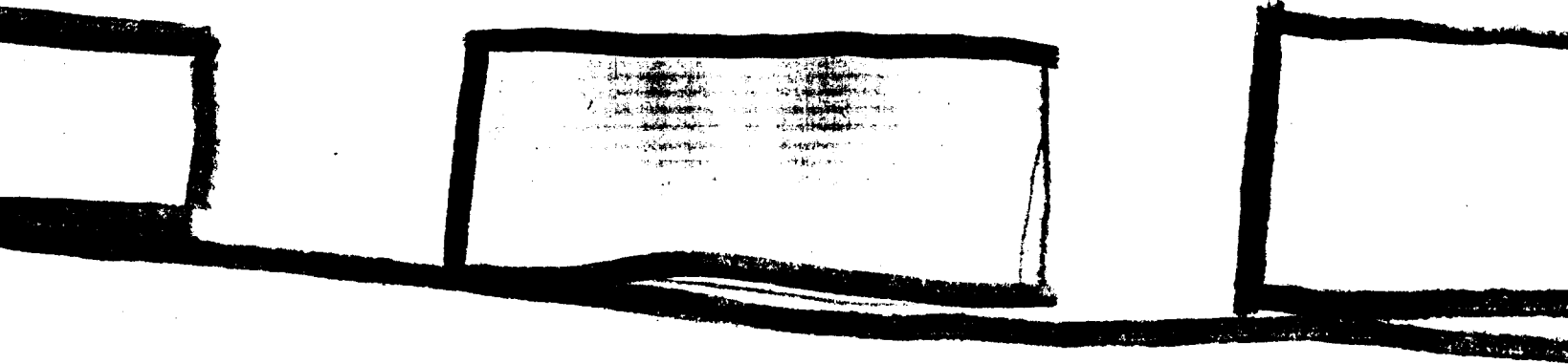
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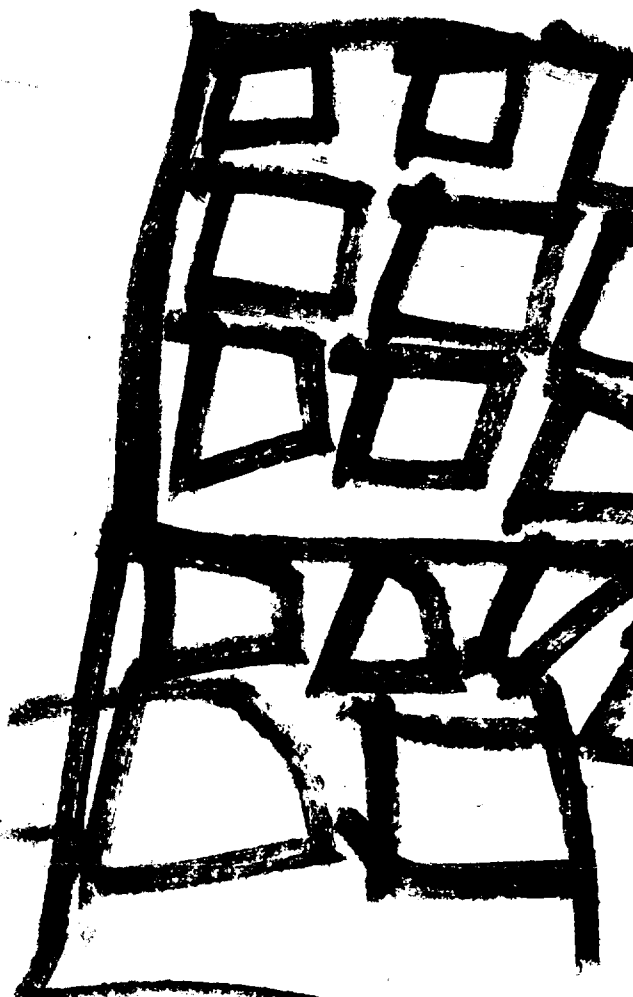
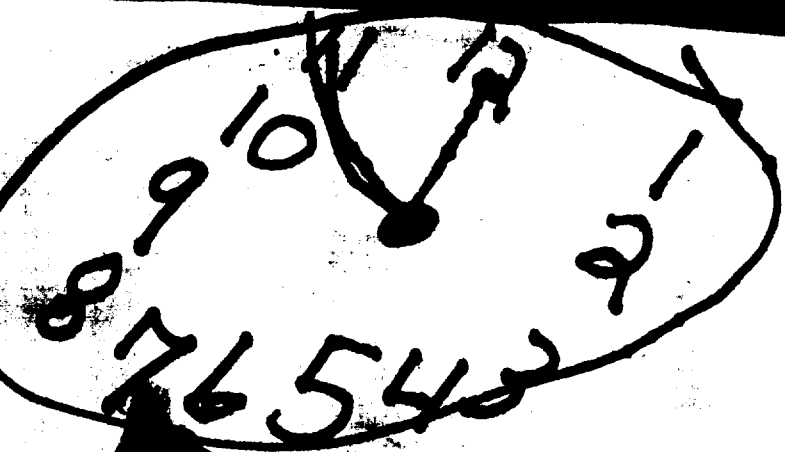


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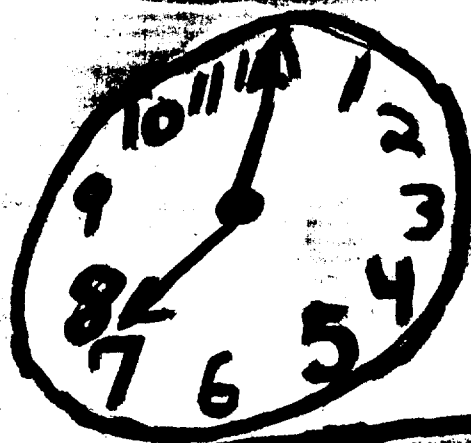
Class
Rules

pieces
of the
month



JACOB SCHMIDT

1961



Who are
we going
to call?



"ghost
busters!"



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